

What's in a name?

When it comes to heritage, more than you might think

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The only thing worse than being the new kid in town is being the new kid in town and having a weird name. My mother's frequent moves and her insistence on calling her only son "Kimo" kept me in double jeopardy.

Nine new schools in 11 years and, at each one, the name sharks attacked. There were simple mutations like "Eskimo" and "Kimono," and more imaginative monikers such as "Commode" and "Queer-mo."

I bore the abuse, telling myself it didn't really matter. But, when I went to live with my father, "Kimo" ceased to exist. He was replaced by the name on my birth certificate ... James.

I failed to realize it at the time, but when I abandoned my nickname, I lost sight of my heritage also. Hawaiian for James, Kimo hails from my grandmother's side of the family.

She was born long before the Pacific island chain became our nation's 50th state. Her father was a paniolo (cowboy) on the largest ranch in the islands, and her grandfather was ranch foreman.

Our ancestors developed a peaceful, civilized society. Hawaiians formed their own language and religion. Native astrologers created a calendar based on the cycles of the moon and used the stars for navigation at sea. Unfortunately, the strategic location of the islands made them a target for colonization and much of the original Hawaiian culture was lost.

I wouldn't learn this until much later however. Like many Americans raised on high school history lessons, I was ignorant to anything beyond popular American or European cultures. There were other stories out there, but I rarely heard about them. As the saying goes, "Winners write the history books."

Joining the military opened my eyes. As a newspaper editor, I couldn't help but get involved in the annual ethnic celebrations.

At first, it was just another story to write. For a while, I fell into the same trap many heritage committee members stumble into. Each year, I would pull out the same old features on famous Black, Asian-Pacific, Hispanic or American Indian people and run them in the paper. Put a checkmark in the box, another event covered.

Eventually, some of the material sank into my lethargic brain cells and took root. I can't put my finger on it, but somewhere between taking photos during the fashion shows in February and sampling homemade chimichangas in September, the light came on.

I realized the past holds a lot of heroes besides George Washington and Mickey Mantle. Heritage observances give us the chance to learn about them and think about their contributions to our world.

One young Hawaiian woman's story has earned my admiration and respect. While in the Philippines teaching English, she was taken prisoner by Japanese soldiers during World War II. Although her camp was spared the horrors of the Bataan Death March, the teacher suffered greatly.

During imprisonment, her impacted wisdom teeth were cut out. Going into shock was the anesthesia she received to stop the pain. Malnutrition melted the healthy young woman into a spectre unable to eat solid foods by the time U.S. Marines eventually liberated the camp. Later, she was awarded the U.S. Prisoner of War Medal.

Through it all, she fought to stay alive and for this I'm grateful. Had she given up, she could never have been my hero, or my grandmother.